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Reaching Students Effectively

by Kiersten Zinnikas

At times, teaching feels a bit like performing. Depending on the size of the class, there may be 25 faces (or more) staring at you, thinking all manner of things, and waiting to see what you will do next. When I began my student teaching internship, it was a bit intimidating to know that I was the one person they were (supposed to be) looking at and paying attention to. Throughout the months I spent at the school, the intimidation faded and I eagerly began to look forward to each group of students. A key difference was that I went in the first day hoping desperately to be liked and came out at the end hoping to be respected by the students and effective as an educator. By the end of the semester, it also became apparent that a teacher must be able to, as a comedian would, read the room and tailor the instruction to match the audience.

As a student teacher, I had the opportunity to observe different teachers in action both inside and outside of the classroom to see how they taught and connected with students. There truly is no one-size-fits-all approach to reaching students and helping them achieve success. The teachers I saw ranged in years of experience, but they all shared a trait: they would shift their content, delivery, or manner to best match what the students – or even one specific student – needed. One teacher spent almost everyday after school with a group of students guiding them through their readings and other assignments because this was helpful for them and also the sort of additional attention they needed. Another established firm expectations and more of a no-nonsense attitude with certain students and saw a positive response. A third teacher permitted a student to spend time with her for an extra period until he “cooled off” because she knew that this student did not have a good relationship with any administrators and sending him to one of them would only result in more trouble.

Before I began my student teaching experience, I had only my own experiences with school to reflect upon and the experiences of my siblings. My brother and I needed different things in school. My brother will readily attribute his success in particular classes to a teacher who made a huge difference in his level of achievement. He needed a teacher who was willing to be more personal in class and demonstrate interest in each student. I was a compliant student who grasped content quickly, but who needed support that had nothing whatsoever to do with academics. In the future, I hope to be a teacher who can connect with students like the two of us as well as the teachers I observed while student teaching. While it may be easy to walk into a classroom and see a group of students, it takes an effective teacher to see a room full of individuals.

Kiersten Zinnikas will be graduating in May 2017 from Rutgers Graduate School of Education with her Ed.M in English Education K-12. She hopes to one day inspire her students to love reading as much as she does!